

PRATHAM BOOKS
A Book in Every Child's Hand

Level 4

Shanti's Friend

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Shanti always had to get up early in the morning. Just when the sky was getting lighter and most people were asleep in their beds. She had to get up early to make tea for Chacha ji and Chachi ji.



Shanti was eleven years old. She stayed with Chacha ji and Chachi ji in the city. She had to come to the city because it did not rain in her village for two years. All the crops dried up in the fields. Soon there was very little food to eat.

Shanti’s father fell sick and her mother didn't know what to do. There was no money for his medicine and no food for Shanti and Pappu and Guddi. The children stopped going to the village school. But Shanti’s Chacha ji and Chachi ji who lived in the big city were very kind.

“Don’t worry,” Chacha ji said. “Shanti can come and stay with us in the city.”

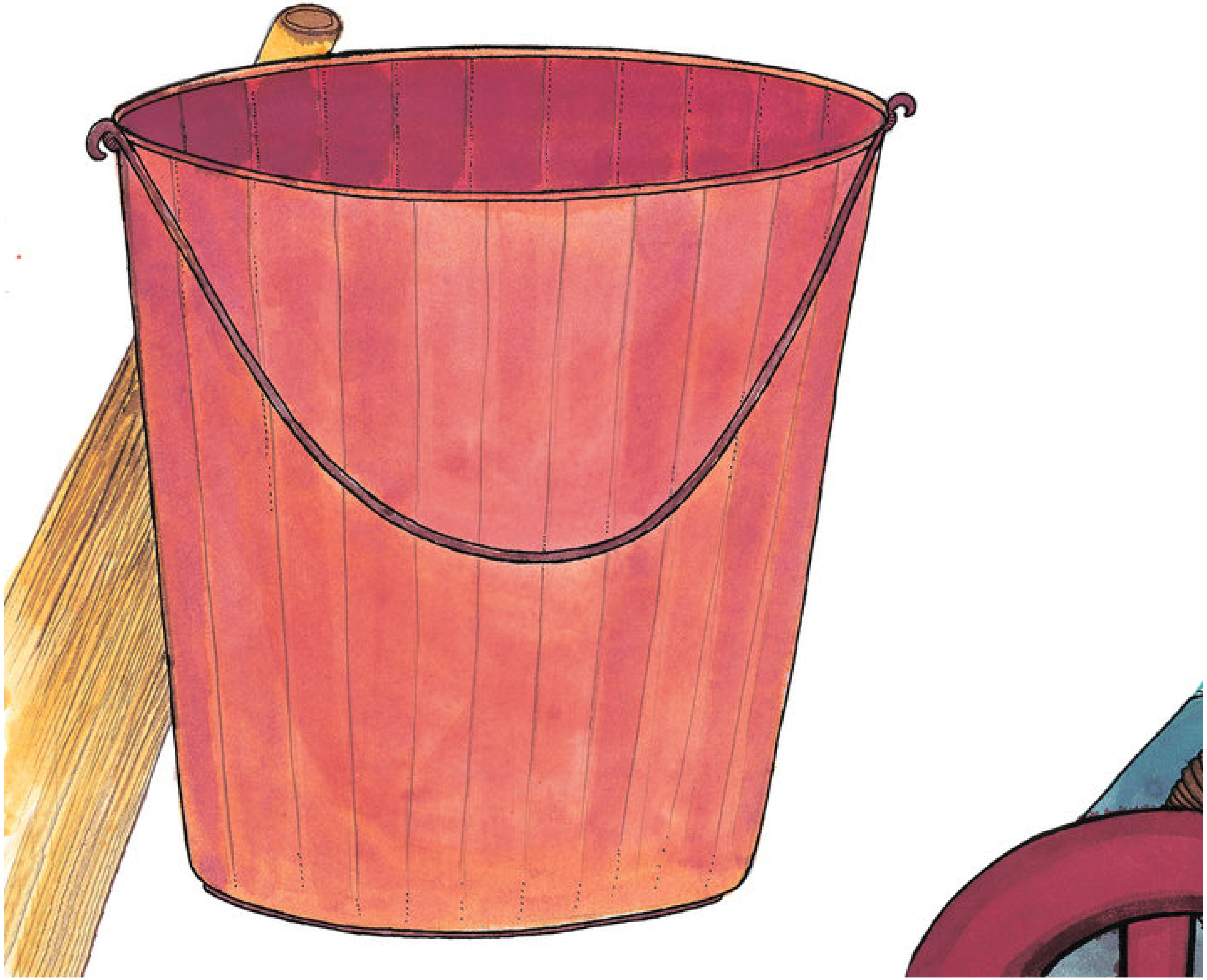
“She can help me in the house,” Chachi ji said. “Maybe she can go to school too.”

“Go to school too! You are too kind,” Shanti’s mother said. “I’ll try and find work where they are building a new road. I might earn enough money for the rest of us.”



Shanti came to the city with Chacha ji and Chachi ji in a bus. The city was huge and the city was dirty. There were lots of houses and very few trees.

Shanti missed the big banyan tree in her village and the pond where she used to bathe.

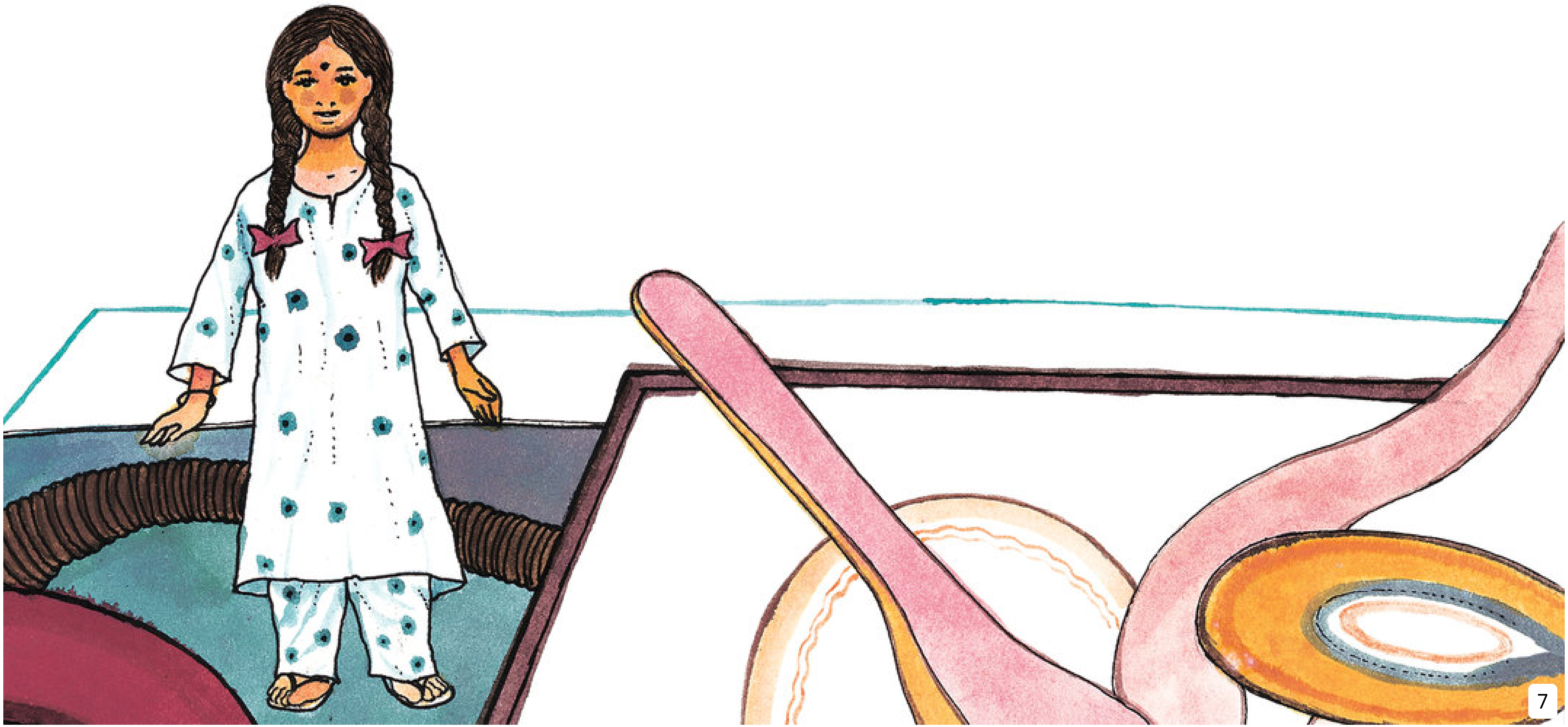


Here she had to carry water in a bucket from the tap on the street. Lots of people stood in line for that water. Sometimes they fought. Sometimes someone pushed Shanti's bucket aside and she got late.

Then Chacha ji scolded her because he needed that water to bathe and was getting late for work.

But Shanti knew she was very lucky. There was enough food to eat here. And she loved the baby, Mamta. So she worked very hard and wondered when she could join school. When she asked Chachi ji, she said, “There’s no time to go to school. Maybe next year, when Mamta is older.”

Shanti was disappointed but still tried to do things nicely. But sometimes she made mistakes. Then Chacha ji and Chachi ji got angry.



When Chacha ji and Chachi ji got angry Shanti got very scared. Chacha ji’s voice became as loud as thunder. Chachi ji's face looked sharp as a knife. “You useless girl!” they would shout. “You’re stupid and lazy and good-for-nothing!”

One day Chachi ji scolded her a lot. Shanti got so scared that she ran off. ‘I’ll go home,’ she thought. But she had no money for the bus ticket. What was she to do? She sat down under a tree to think. It was a nice tree. Not as big as the banyan tree in the village, but nice and shady.





Shanti leaned against its trunk and closed her eyes. Suddenly she heard someone whisper, “Don’t cry, Shanti! You're a wonderful girl. You’re so quick and clever.”

Shanti looked around. But there was no one there. It couldn’t be the tree! Trees couldn’t speak.

“Shanti, if you were not there what would Chachi ji do? Who would help her?” someone said again. “And if you didn’t help Chachi ji, how would Amma feed Pappu and Guddi?” Shanti smiled because she knew it was true. But no one had ever told her that. She looked around again. Maybe some trees can speak, she thought.

Shanti wiped her tears and went back. After that, whenever she finished her work she went and sat under the tree. Sometimes, she would carry an old school book and flip through the pages. She would try and read out the lines to the tree. The tree always said nice things to her. Shanti knew she was not alone. She had a friend, here in the big city. She didn’t feel so scared any more.

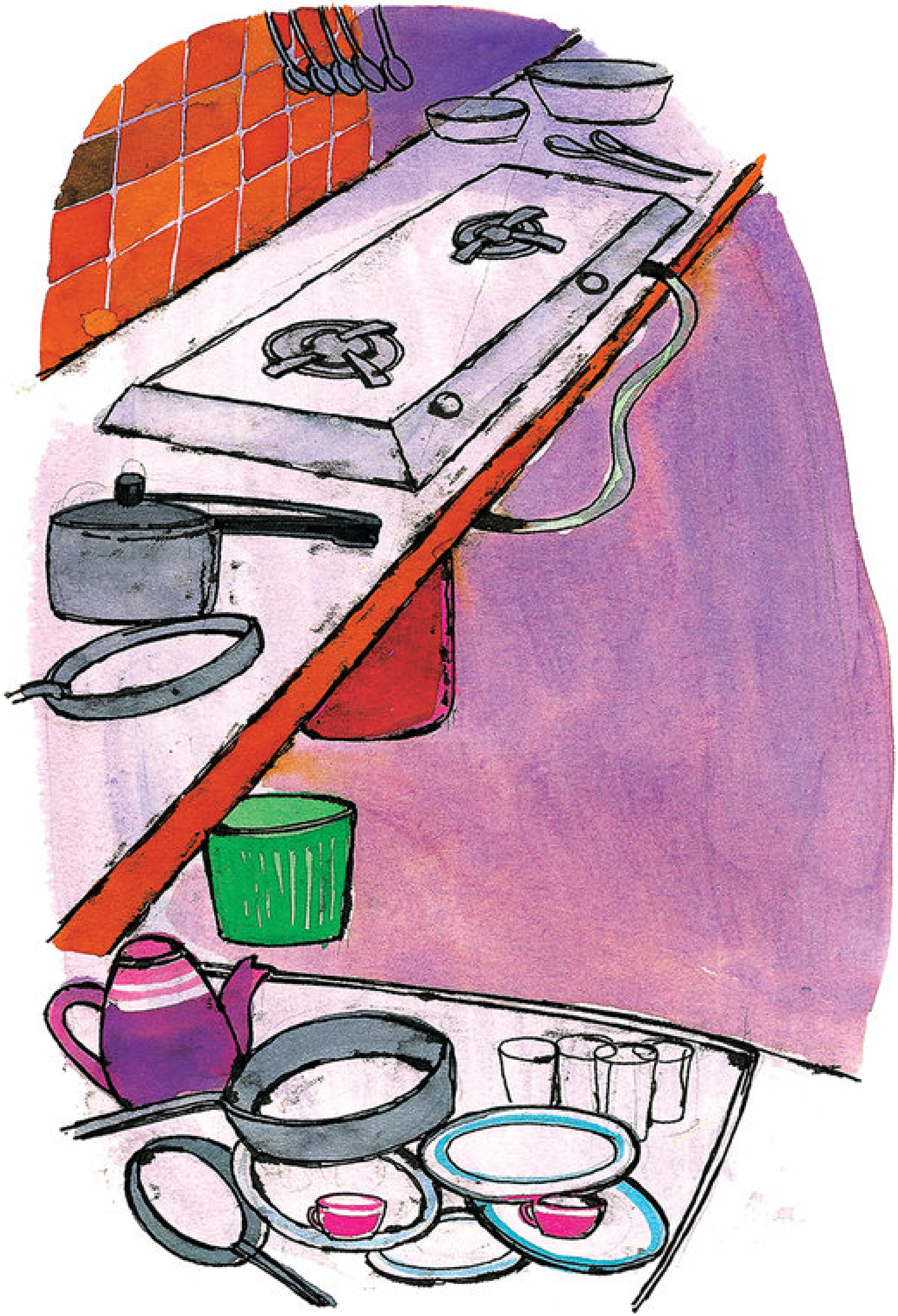
One morning, Shanti got up early as usual. She lit the stove and made tea. She poured it into two glasses and took it for Chacha ji and Chachi ji. She tried to go into the room quietly but the door made a sound. Baby Mamta got up and began to cry.





“Look what you’ve done!” said Chachi ji. “Go bring a biscuit for her!” Shanti put the tea down and rushed off on twinkle toes. She was back with the biscuit in a minute. Chachi ji yawned.

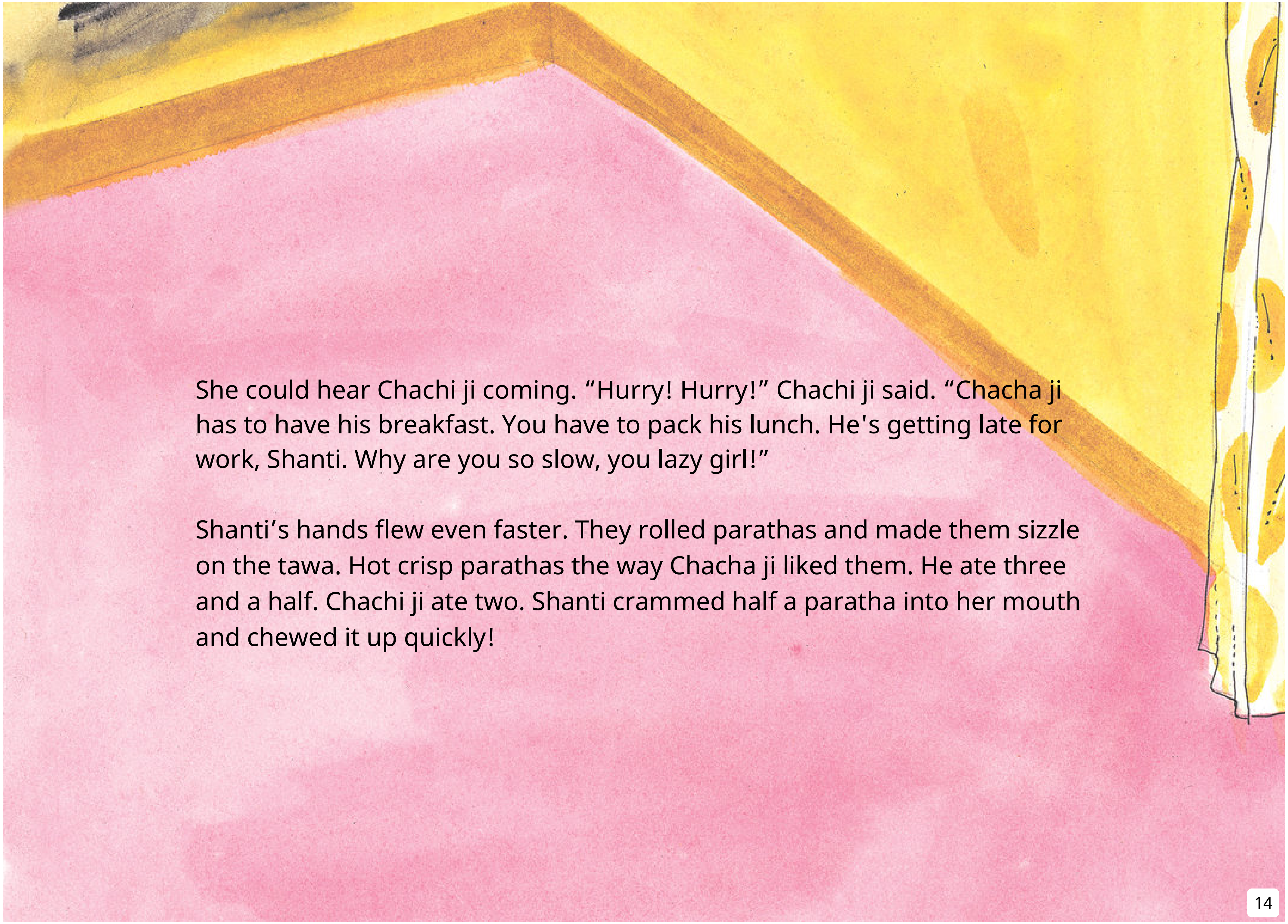
She took the biscuit and put it in Mamta's hand. Mamta put the biscuit in her mouth and smiled at Shanti.



“Agh-gha-gha,” she said and waved her arms. Shanti smiled too. She knew what it meant. It meant, “Come play with me!” But there was no time to play right now. There was water to fetch, dishes to wash and breakfast to be made. The vegetables had to be cut. Dal had to be put on the gas to cook.

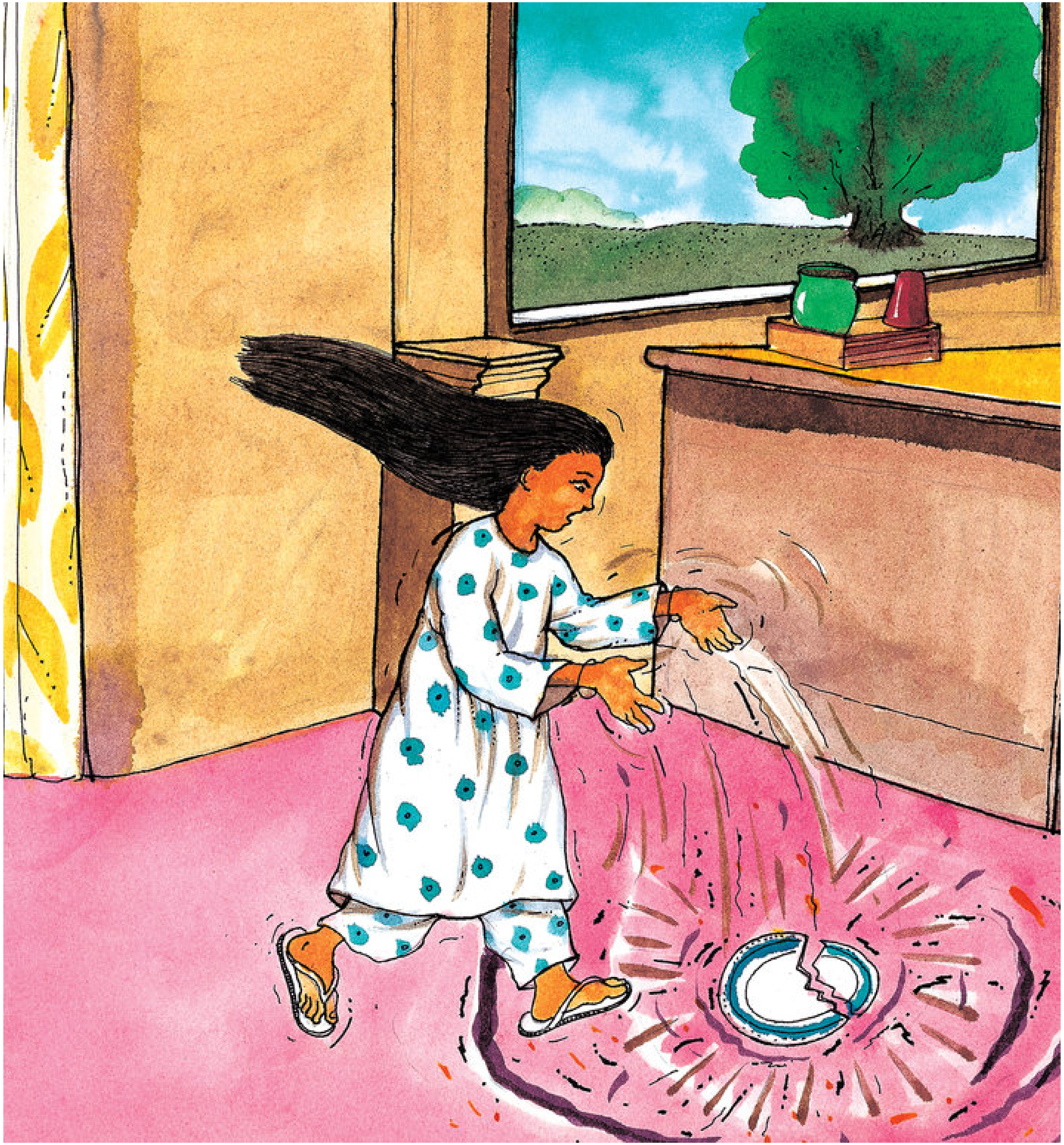
“In a while,” Shanti said. “Very soon.”

Shanti ran so fast that you couldn’t see her feet. Her fingers flew. They zipped and flashed as she worked.



She could hear Chachi ji coming. “Hurry! Hurry!” Chachi ji said. “Chacha ji has to have his breakfast. You have to pack his lunch. He's getting late for work, Shanti. Why are you so slow, you lazy girl!”

Shanti’s hands flew even faster. They rolled parathas and made them sizzle on the tawa. Hot crisp parathas the way Chacha ji liked them. He ate three and a half. Chachi ji ate two. Shanti crammed half a paratha into her mouth and chewed it up quickly!



Hurry! Hurry! There was sweeping to be done before she could play with Mamta. There were dishes to wash. Scrub, scrub, rinse, rinse! Shanti’s hands flew again.

Hurry! Hurry! Oh-h! A plate slipped from her hands!

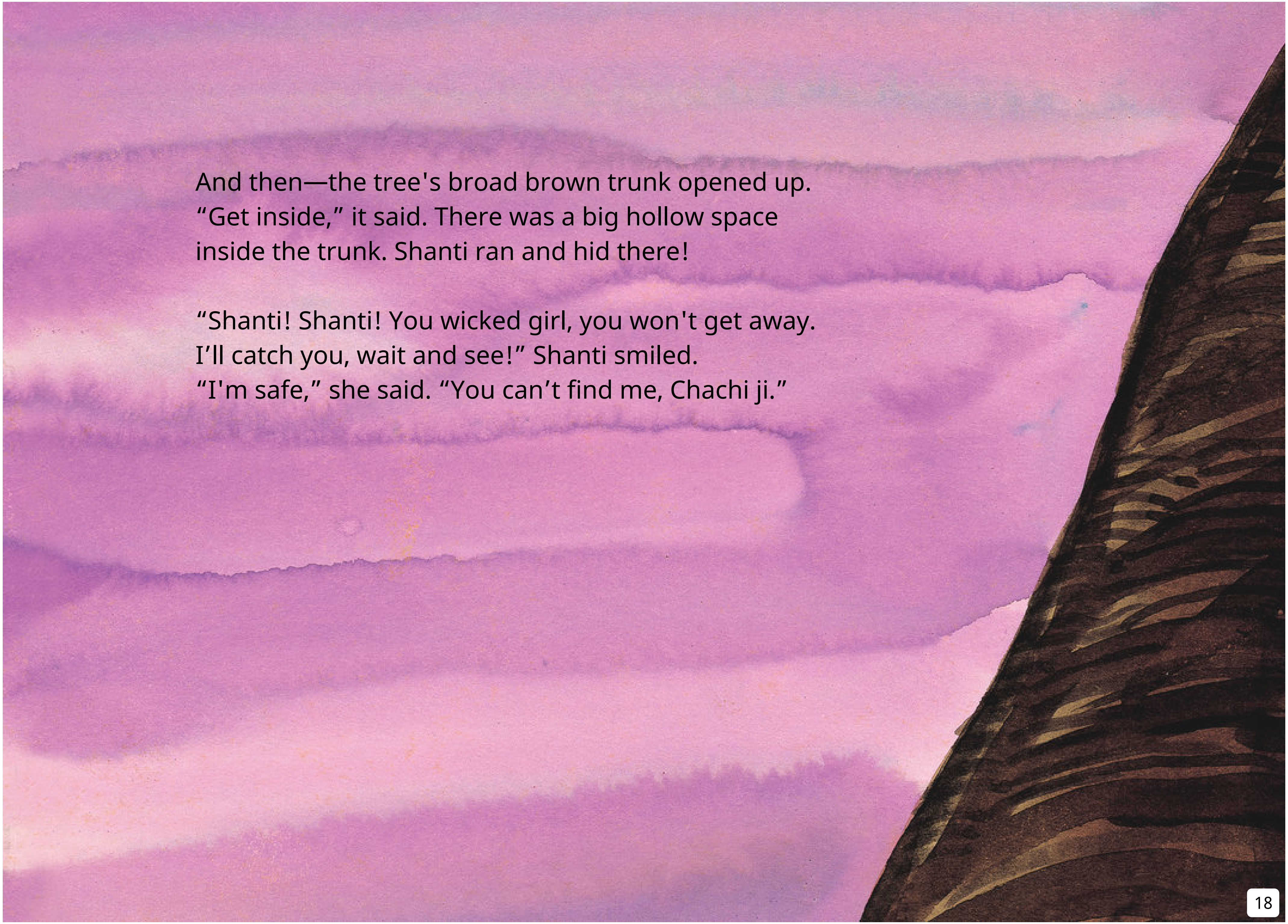


CRASH! Shanti heard the plate fall. And Shanti was so afraid that she ran. She ran out of the door, out into the street. She could hear Chachi ji screaming, “Shanti, you stupid girl! You know how much that plate cost?” Chachi ji was really angry. She might even slap Shanti.

Where could she go? Where could she hide?

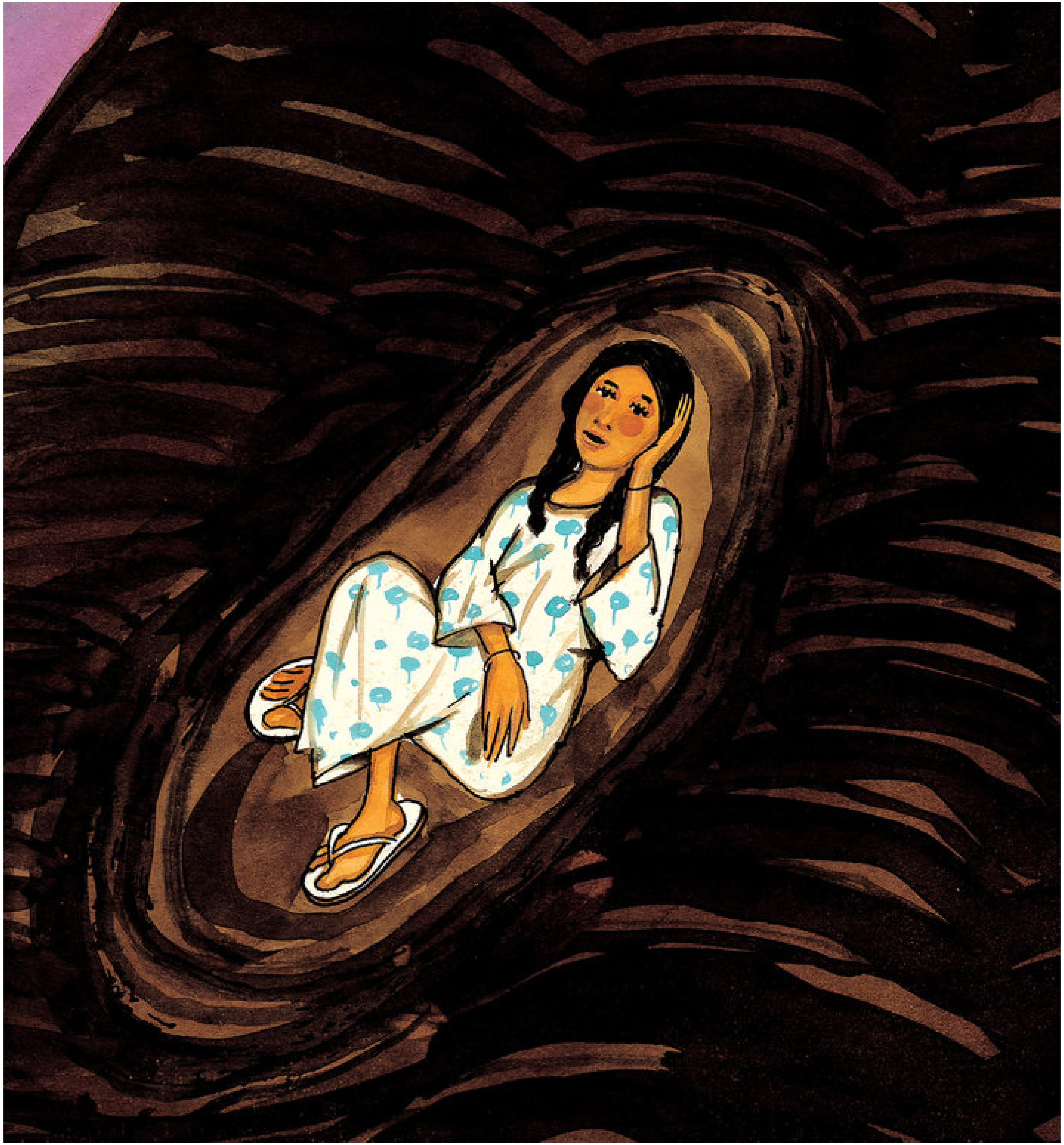


She ran to her friend, the tree.
“Help! Help me!” she cried.



And then—the tree's broad brown trunk opened up. “Get inside,” it said. There was a big hollow space inside the trunk. Shanti ran and hid there!

“Shanti! Shanti! You wicked girl, you won't get away. I’ll catch you, wait and see!” Shanti smiled.
“I'm safe,” she said. “You can’t find me, Chachi ji.”



“Shanti! Shanti! Where are you? Shanti?” Chachi ji’s voice got softer and softer. Shanti took a big, deep breath. Chachi ji could never find her here. It was dark and cosy inside the tree.

Shanti curled up and slept. Slept and slept till she heard a baby crying.

It was Mamta. “Quiet! Quiet!” she heard Chachi ji shout. But Mamta wouldn’t be quiet.

“Quiet! Quiet!” Chacha ji's shouted. Mamta cried louder. Chacha ji was back! Was it evening already! What was Shanti going to do? She would just stay there inside the tree.

Safe from everyone who scolded her.

Mamta was crying even louder now. Chachi ji said, “She just won’t be quiet. If only Shanti were here. She knows how to make her quiet. Oh, where has she gone?”

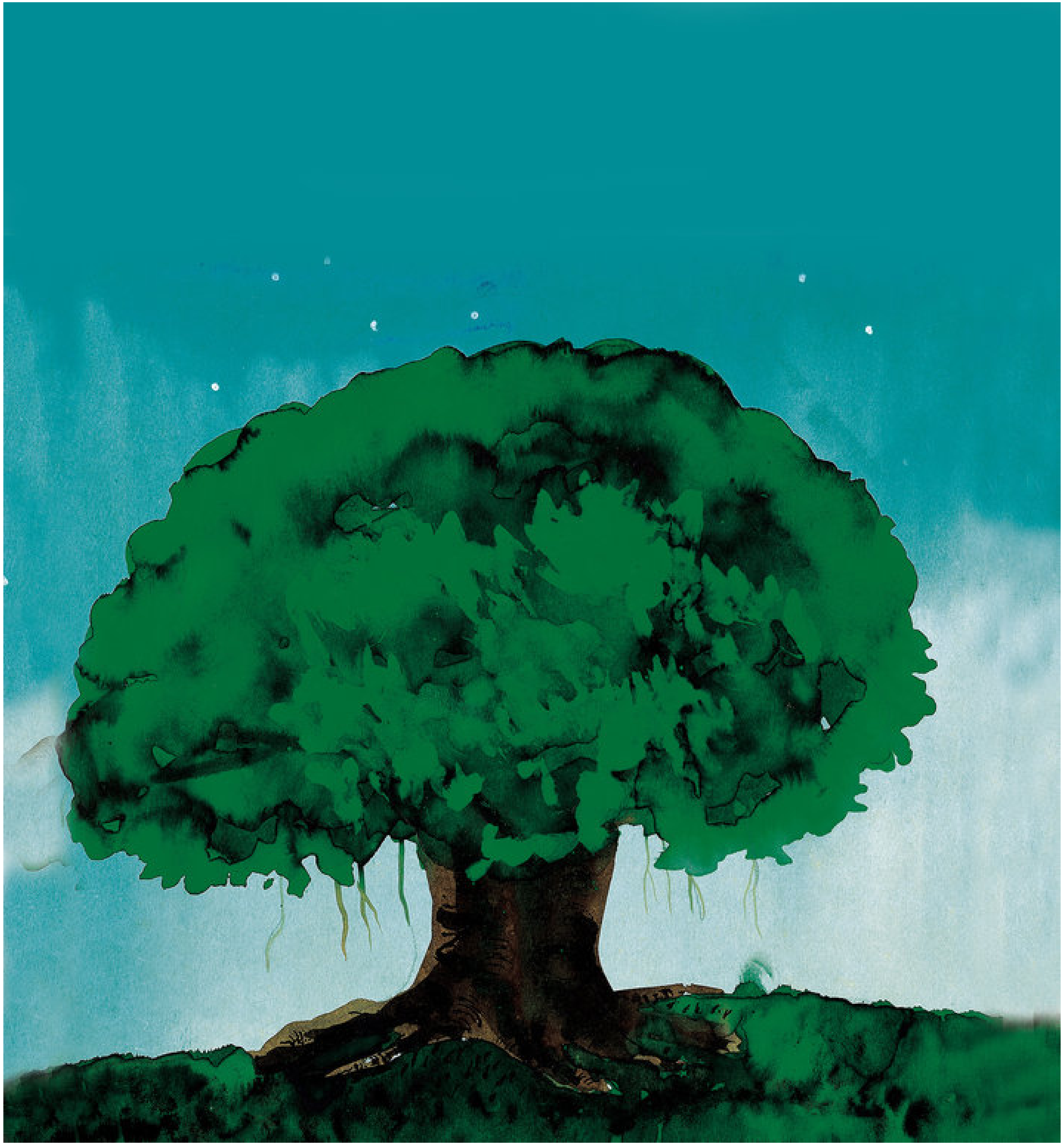




“You scold her too much,” Chacha ji said. “What will we tell her parents? We’ll be in trouble!” “I won’t scold her any more, I promise!” Chachi ji cried. “If only she’d come back! I’ll never scold her again.”

Shanti smiled. Should she go back? It was so much nicer here inside the tree.

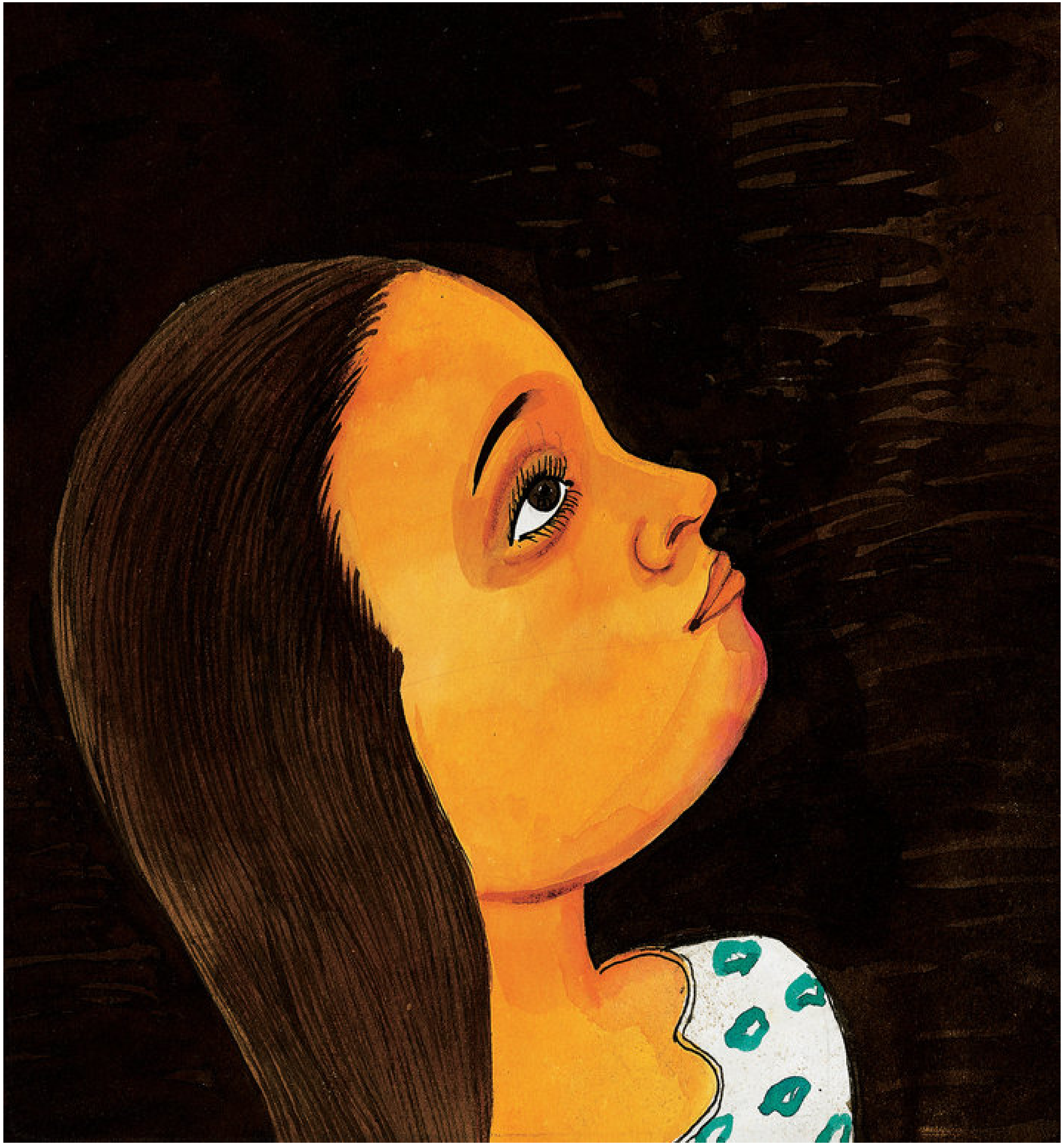
But Mamta was still crying. She knew why she was crying. She was waiting for Shanti to come play with her. Should she go?



Suddenly the tree spoke again. “You can go, if you want,” it whispered. “But you can come back whenever you want.”

“Can I! Can I really?”

“Of course, you can. This place is always there, just for you!” the tree whispered. Shanti took a big, long breath. Should she go back?



Mamta was crying so loudly. “All right,” she said. “I-I think I’ll go now. But I'll come back if I want.”

“Whenever you want…” whispered the tree. It opened up its trunk. Shanti stepped out.

She walked to the house slowly and rang the bell. Chacha ji opened the door.

“Shanti?” he asked. “Where were you?” “Visiting a friend,” she said. “I was tired. And…I broke a plate by mistake. I was afraid Chachi ji would scold me.” “Shanti!” Chachi ji cried. “Where were you?”

“Visiting a friend,” Chacha ji said. “The poor girl gets tired of working all the time. She’s just a child. So what if she broke a plate? It can happen to anyone.”

“Yes,” says Chachi ji slowly. “She’s just a child. So what if she broke a plate? Shanti, will you hold Mamta for a while? I’ll make a cup of tea for you. Then I’ll cook dinner while you play with Mamta.”

Mamta stopped crying. She said, “Agh-gha-gha,” and held her arms out to Shanti. Shanti tickled her and made her laugh. Chacha ji smiled and said, “She missed you so much that she didn’t stop crying.” “Mamta likes me,” Shanti said. Chachi ji said, “Don’t go away again, Shanti or Mamta will cry. And…we like you too.”





Then Chacha ji said, “Another thing, Shanti…tomorrow I’ll find out about the school.”

Shanti looked out through the window at her friend, the tree. She smiled and didn’t say anything. Now she would never be scared again. She had found a safe place which would always be there for her.



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Shanti's Friend
(English)

Do trees speak? That is what Shanti believes. Read this story of an unusual friendship ...

This is a Level 4 book for children who can read fluently and with confidence.